Everything seems so quiet; the only thing strong enough to bring me to my senses is the sweet aroma of a child’s soft breath sweeping across my face like a warm sea breeze. My eyes open to reveal my two young children, Tatiana and Emanuel. Tatiana’s deep shadowy skin contrasts in a kind of harmony with Emanuel’s creamy dark color. He sleeps with his arms roped around his older sister, as if he had the responsibility of protecting her. At only five years old, Emanuel can manage to win over everyone he meets with his frail underfed body and his gracious heart. A sad smile is painted on my lips, and it pains me to think of how I must wake them soon to prepare for school.

I tenderly brush a lock of matted hair from my daughter’s smooth forehead, much like my mother used to do to me when I was a young, carefree girl. Despite my eternal fatigue I gradually extend my legs, rough and caked in dirt from our earth flooring, and examine what gifts God has given me today. Each day I am always thankful to be a single mother rather than catering to an extended family of grandparents and cousins. This is the one luxury I enjoy before I realize exactly where I am living. The generic 9 x 9 foot primitive cinderblock house is no different from the house next door and the house two blocks down, but we feel a sense of security and call it our home. This is who we are, this is our life; it is safe and it is what we know.

With midmorning sunlight bountifully pouring in I find the will to turn my eyes up to the singular window, located on the eastern wall, to reveal the busy and filthy streets of Port-au-Prince.

“Oke, vin sou vin sou! Time to get up… up up up!” I cross to the brawny woven grass bed where the children sleep and tap each of them on the bottom of their small feet.

“Pa gen mesi… pa gen…” Emanuel’s words trail off as his eyes clench shut under the bright light.

“Oh, no, no, no, don’t ‘no thank you’ me. Alright get up for school. I work too hard to have you skippin out on this stuff… Tatiana come mwen renmen, my love come.” This is our regular routine for the morning; me begging the children to attend school for they always come up with some reason not to go.

“Tanpri, tanpri, we don’t want to go manmi, tanpri.” Tatiana calls me by the traditional affectionate name for a mother, “manmi,” hoping it will gain some favor with me. To show her that her love does not go unnoticed, I softly kiss her on the forehead. I clutch her fragile chin in my coarse hand; our eyes slowly catch and she knows that I don’t need any trouble this morning. It amazes me sometimes to look into her deep hazel eyes and not see an eleven year old, but a twenty year old woman staring back. Tatiana turns away and drags her legs over to her allotted corner where her grimy smock dress lays; it has now lost its lime coloring and has taken the dye of an earthy mudslide.

“Emanuel vin sou, do as your sister does… Emanuel?” I look around to see my little boy nowhere in sight. “Emanuel! Where is that boy? Emanu…Ah!” Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of two children roughhousing over a multicolored soccer ball. “Tatiana, mwen renmen, get your brother, will you? Tell him he needs to stop playing and get ready for lekòl la.”

With the children out of the house, I take a brief moment to assess the spoils of our contorted plastic crate. I look down into the blood orange container to reveal what I had anticipated.

Nothing.

The bare, bottomless crate only makes the feeling of hunger more unbearable. I stare straight into the blank box, hoping that if I stare long enough something, anything, will appear out of thin air. Nothing does. In one last attempt, I swipe some of the feathery dust from the empty space, still feeling around for some kind of food I might have missed. Perhaps I’ll find a small grain of sorghum, crunchy and bitter as it may be, that will satisfy the rumble of my children’s stomachs. A growl escapes my tummy as Emanuel enters.

“Manmi, manmi! Look at what Ms. Maneeya give, looky look manmi!” My beautiful son holds his bony arms out, each one bearing two bananas.

“Oh Emanuel… oh.” No other words come to my mind at the moment. I suppose I should be used to living off the charity of others, considering we have been getting by like this for the past year. Simply, I take the fruit and divide one whole banana in half between the two famished children. I give Tatiana her half; she takes it without reply, just a swift nod of her head and a trail off of the eyes. When Emanuel retrieves his piece he motions with his hands, whining like a small puppy. “No, no, I’m sorry,” I have such a hard time saying no to this boy, “we’re saving the rest for dinner.” I give him an apologetic smile, because I know he will still go hungry.

“Alright manmi, I think we should go.” Tatiana motions to Emanuel that it is time to get moving.

“Manmi, please. Don’t make me go to school! I like being here at this home. Manmi, I stay at my home.” Emanuel reaches his limbs up, in a way signing “uppy.” I take him into my short arms and cradle him lovingly. I examine my son and register the minuscule bee-like biting midge, native to Haitian lands, creeping along the collar of his torn shirt. Although these insects are known to cause Mansonellosis, I calmly brush it off; we Haitian’s have become accustomed to these flies over the years.

“I’m sorry, mwen renmen, you must go today. Do you have any idea how lucky you are, Emanuel? Most kids in this part of town don’t even know how to write their own name. No, you must go to school; you mustn’t worry, the school is just as safe as home.” I place him on the ground before I scoot Tatiana and him off to school. As Tatiana firmly grabs hold of Emanuel’s arm, he looks back to me with tears welling in his eyes. I motion to him go on; he does, and I blow them each one last longing kiss goodbye.

“Alright… now where exactly did…” I trail off as I search around for my beads. The only way for me to support two growing children is to sell homemade beads down at the central market. Each individual bead is made from clay found in the damp corners of my house. Some days I spend hours upon hours forming 2 centimeter wide spheres that are eventually embellished with different and unique handmade designs.

Once I locate my wicker basket of dried beads, I step outside the house and shut the door as tight as my weak muscles can bear because we can’t afford a lock. It never seems to do much; the house still gets ransacked at least once a week. Before I head down the narrow alleys to the market, I pause in front of my neighbor’s house to check the clock she displays in her window. Twelve noon. I am running later than usual, so I quicken my pace.

Running down the narrow paths between the Port-au-Prince buildings is like weaving through an impossible maze. If you don’t know these streets like the back of your hand, you don’t have much of a chance of reaching your destination. I pass many civilians that I know from everyday market sales or through my children. The tropical climate gives off waves of fruity sensations and humid air that fill my dense lungs.

When traveling from end to end of the back ways, I can’t help but notice the same buildings every day. The brightly colored towers are splattered with shades of lime, orchid, Caribbean blue, and mango. Perhaps the most extraordinary effect of these buildings is that they appear to be filled with song. Songs of our people; every new color exudes a different tune. One cannot miss the size of these structures. Each one has unstable story on top of unstable story; as many as five floors at a time.

My callused feet ache from the rough and harsh mountainous terrain of Port-au-Prince’s streets as I finally reach my destination. The market is buzzing with culture as it always is. In one corner I examine different stands filled with agricultural riches like coffee, mangos, sugarcane, sorghum, and rice. On the other side of the market there are countless shops festooned with textiles, copper, and marble.

I make quick work to pick out a spot on the ground and set up my business. It is a tedious task to lay out each one of my singular beads, separating them by design and paint. I usually spend four to five hours selling beads. My day is not all uninteresting. I get to entertain myself with the examination of different styles of fashion, some perhaps on the rise. Women now-a-days are flaunting the old fashioned head scarves but most stick to the traditional long skirt with a printed tank top or t-shirt.

The market eventually starts clearing as the day comes to a close. Although it is impossible for me to compete with the gold dealers, I manage to make about one gourde more then yesterday. It might even be enough money to buy breakfast for tomorrow.

It is about 4:45 p.m. when I finish packing up my items and decide to venture home. I decide to travel the less scenic route and take the shortcut that only lasts about five minutes.

“Ah, here we are,” I exclaim as I step inside my cozy shack. Nothing has been destroyed and nothing appears missing; this was a good day. With time to spare I leisurely step over to the rusting faucet about to fall out of its place. “Perhaps we’ll have runnin’ water today...” Before I am able to turn the faucet a rumbling purges from what feels like deep under the earth. Our front door starts swinging violently and my world is beginning to shake. I know what this is. Earthquake!

As soon as my brain registers what is happening, I repeatedly try to force my legs to move but they won’t cooperate.

“Move!” I command myself. Inching forward takes much more focus then I anticipated. Immediately, I am thrown off balance, and my legs turn to jelly with my first step. Nothing seems to look the same and there is no stable ground for me to gain my balance. Just as I am about to reach the door, something comes crashing down. All of a sudden the weight of what seems like a hundred buildings crushes down onto my body, pounds and pounds of hard cinderblock burying what is left of me. All around me I hear shrieks of pure terror and fear; I cannot join them for there is too much dust in my limited supply of air.

“What is happening to me?” This is my first thought. Then I feel ashamed that my very first thought after the earthquake is, “what is happening to *me*?”, what kind of mother am I?! A sharp pain enters through my right knee and makes its way up to my heart.

“My children…” I realize now that I do have the ability to speak. I call louder “My children! God help me! Someone, I have to get to my children! Help… help!” I yell this now as loud as I can. With no response, I must assume everyone around me has died or no one can hear me.

Determined to get to my little boy and girl and using what feeling I have in my hands, I begin to push up on the ponderous rocks crushing me. Miraculously, the weight of the block on my head seems to lessen. Then, with one more push, the pressure is released. Light streams in and blinds me for just a moment but then I am able to focus. The blood saturated head of my young neighbor, Ms.Maneeya, illuminates my sight.

“Johanne!” She stares at me for a moment in pure shock. “Johanne, thank God you’re… I can’t believe the building collapsed. I thought for sure you…” She beams at me with her eyes brimming with tears. Realizing my speechlessness, she continues to hurriedly assist me in clearing off the mound of rubble. When I am finally able to control my legs, I stand on my feet.

“No Johanne, you can’t go. You need to sit. Your entire building collapsed. I don’t even know if anyone else is alive… Don’t go please.” Ms. Maneeya breathlessly begs me and grabs hold of my arm. As soon as she touches me, I rip my hand away.

“My children, my children. I have to find them, what if…” The thought hits me just as I shove Ms. Maneeya out of the way and take off sprinting. No, no, no, they can’t possibly be dead can they? If our house collapsed on me what could keep the school from crumbling as well.

With every new, painful thought, I will my body to move faster. Every living person is either digging out a loved one or lying on the ground, slowly bleeding out of numerous fissures on their body. Already piles are being made of the dead. One stack was for just little boys; to think my Emanuel or my Tatiana could be just another addition to those piles is too much to bear. Everywhere people are running around in a frenzy; nobody knows what to do. I pass a building collapsed only on the top three floors. I am puzzled by the liquid oozing out of the sides of the building. It is flowing like a river but it makes no sense that a poor structure like that would have running water. But as I get closer, I become aware of what this liquid is; it is blood. The red fluid drips down the walls from the bodies of Haitian people being crushed inside. I have to turn my head away because I cannot bear the thought of this being the fate of someone I had the privilege to know.

I reach the school with a sickening thought. Other parents have already arrived and are either cuddling their children they have found alive or weeping in misery over the ones that are already lost. Without thinking, I start digging for anyone, for either one of my kids. Every place I sift through I come up empty handed until I recognize a little blue shirt.

“Oh my God! Oh my God, Lord please, please God!” My arms shoot down to a toddler sized body buried underneath a pile of marble. I discover a very soft and feeble child dusted in debris who is clutching a short number two pencil. His eyes are already closed so that he appears to be in an angelic sleep. I clutch the tiny body in my arms and identify the sweet face to be the one of my little boy, Emanuel.

“Bondye! Bondye…Emanuel! Oh my son, my boy! Oh Bondye, God, Why? Why! Why, why, why… what has he done wrong? What?” I curse the heavens in fits of rage and demand why my angel was taken from me.

Once again I glance down at the fragile child resting in my arms. His gangly limbs dangle down. With each passing moment, he becomes harder to see as my tears blur my sight. The frustration and pain building up inside of me is growing too rapidly for me to control. I break down over his body and catch the scent of industrial powder, surly from the dirt he was buried in.

“Why? God you have forsaken me. You have taken what I love most! Give him back… I beg you Lord, please…” My rage begins to soften to a pathetic plea for mercy. “God, with your grace grant me mercy, if not for me, him, oh Lord please… I beg you.” I now cradle Emanuel’s lifeless body gently in my arms. Finally, I am able to look up and take notice of the frantic school of surviving teachers and students searching for those still buried. I trace the distraught crowd and am able to identify Tatiana.

“Tati… Tatiana! Tatiana, I’m here mwen renmen, I’m here!” While still clutching my son, I wave my left arm vigorously in the air screaming at the top of my lungs for my daughter. With unbelievable luck, she locates my cries. Tatiana rushes into my arm and we embrace. I hold her as tight as my weak arm can bear and I feel the jagged indents on her back from where I am sure she was stuck by countless pieces of chalky rubble.

“Manmi, I was so scared… I thought you would never come. Mommy, Mika, Molita, and Yanick they’re all…” Tatiana rotates her head to the small child resting in the crook of my right arm. “Dead…” She finishes her sentence with more sorrow then I ever believed a little girl would be capable of. Without saying a word she reaches down and strokes the smooth head of her little brother. I can sense the tears in her eyes progressing inside, so when I look at her she finally lets out a countless flood of small heated tears from each eye. Tatiana’s silent sobs pain me to see as she squeezes her little brother’s shoulder.

I look up to find hundreds of people roaming the street mindlessly and hopelessly. Every weary person is dusted in a thin sheet of pale powder and everyone’s lips are chapped with the cement filled air.

“Eskiez mwen, Miss, the President has just sent out a radio broadcast that all refugees are to report to the central square of Port-au-Prince. It’s his orders, I’m sorry.” A young Haitian man tries to pick both Tatiana and me up from our sitting position.

“How many?” I request.

“Um, eskiez mwen?”

“How many deaths?” This time I ask with more authority.

“Du… I dunno, President said about 200,000 dead so far… probably more. But we really have to go, orders.” Once again he attempts to pick us both off our feet.

“I want to stay here with my son.” At this point I have no intention of leaving my baby on the side of the road.

“I’m sorry but we do have to go, please. The President says everyone can come back to wherever they came from but for now everyone is to report to the square.”

As much as I do not want to leave my son, I know eventually I will have to come to terms. Tatiana knows this too; she takes the first step in getting up. Then she leans down and gently plants a flowery kiss on Emanuel’s sweet forehead and silently turns away, waiting for me to join her. I can’t believe I am about to leave my son, the one thing in my life that has always kept me going. With all the strength I had inside I lean down and leave one lingering kiss on my baby’s head. Then I turn away and set him down softly so that he may lay undisturbed.

The walk to the town square is long and horrifying. I spend this time covering the eyes of little Tatiana and steadying my own upon the cracked pavement. Occasionally I take into account the endless heaps of rubble. Every pile is adorned with spilt boards and cracked cinderblocks. Also, among these inanimate objects are fractured arms and mangled faces, all buried under the mounds. Once we reach the square we assess the people. Everyone has gushing blood or gushing tears. I lead Tatiana to a cramped corner of the central fountain. This is where we make our camp.

Around us there are murmurs of the bit of news that has been broadcasted. Swirls of Haitian Creole, French, and English make it difficult to hear but I am able to make out some information. Apparently it was a 7.0 earthquake on the Richter scale but I have no idea what that means. The President’s palace was destroyed along with the Port-au-Prince cathedral. These are the places people would go first for help but now we have nowhere to find comfort. I can see this realization on the grief stricken faces of the fellow Haitians around me. There isn’t much damage in other places compared to Port-au-Prince because the epicenter was only located 16 miles out of the city.

“Manmi, what are we doing here?” Tatiana questions me so innocently I remember that she is indeed only eleven years old.

“I don’t…this is our new home… that’s all I know.” I have no other way to answer because this is all I know at the moment. “We are gonna be here for awhile mwen renmen, awhile.” I close my eyes and wrap my arms around my last child and hold onto her for dear life, never to let go.